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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2014.12.004>

## Uruguay 2014: Not much of a change in a changing country<sup>☆</sup>



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 15 December 2014

Received in revised form 29 December 2014

Accepted 30 December 2014

Available online 9 January 2015

#### Keywords:

Uruguay

Elections

Direct democracy

Frente Amplio

<sup>☆</sup> This research fits within the scope of the FONDECYT's project N. 1141230 and the Millennium Nucleus for the Study of Stateness and Democracy in Latin America N. 100014. All caveats apply.

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On October 26, 2014, 90% of Uruguayan citizens (2.62 million) went to the polls to choose the president, vice president, and Congress that will rule the country for the 2015–2019 term. Since no party received more than half of the total vote, former president, Tabaré Vázquez, and a young candidate, Luis Lacalle Pou, son of the conservative ex-president, Luis Alberto Lacalle, battled it out in the second

round of the presidential election one month later. Vázquez, the incumbent party's candidate, defeated Lacalle with 53.5% of the vote in the runoff election held on November 30. The victory of Vázquez reinforces the continuity of the “left turn” in the region that started in the beginning of the century and was essentially maintained until the reelection of Dilma Rousseff in Brazil one month prior.

This election result confirms the extraordinary stability of the Uruguayan party system over the last decade. Since 2004 when the Frente Amplio (FA) came into power, the distribution of the vote has shown very little change, with all parties ranked in exactly the same order, and two political blocks (center–left and center–right) that are well balanced. Additionally, for the third time, the ruling party retained the legislative majority, which has allowed it to govern without the necessity of reaching inter-party agreements. The campaign was not strident, with a notably low level of electoral volatility – a historical record low – and relatively low mobilization. The main candidates elaborated a moderate discourse and their electoral platforms were convergent to the center.

## 1. Background

When the FA assumed power for the first time in 2005, with Tabaré Vázquez as President until 2010, the country was just beginning to show modest signs of recovery from one of the deepest economic crises it had ever faced. Ten years later, with José Mujica ending the second term in a row for the FA, the country has drastically changed. The economy performs quite well, and the growth that began in 2003 has continued without any major upheavals. Along with some favorable international conditions, the adequate management of economic and financial policies has made for good socioeconomic performance during both leftist governments, with growing GDP, controlled inflation, unemployment levels at a historic low, and falling poverty.

The improvement in the well-being of the population derives not only from economic growth, but also from a variety of social policies that have made for an important redistribution of income. The implementation of wage boards (where labor unions and employers' organizations have negotiated wages and work conditions inside an institutional framework with government mediation), the strengthening of social security networks, and, especially, increasing money transfers to the poor and expanding health coverage for the workers' families and pensioners, were the main instruments oriented to that goal. Additionally, a significant tax reform was implemented in order to balance investment incentives with progressive income distribution.

On the eve of the electoral cycle, it would have been almost impossible for the ruling party to have it much better. And, notably, Uruguay has made international headlines as the last administration approved a series of groundbreaking policies previously unheard of in Latin America, and some unprecedented even worldwide: gay marriage, abortion by the individual will of the woman, regulation of euthanasia, affirmative action for Afro-descendants, and marijuana regulation (that included State production and sale of the product) among them.

In that context, the popularity of both governments was exceptionally high: Vázquez (2005–2009) left office with a

70% approval rating, and Mujica (2010–2014) had 60% approval by the time of the election. Yet, not everything was so positive, at least from the citizenry's perspective. Education, particularly secondary education, and crime occupied a pivotal place in the debate. Particularly, public security, was the most salient issue during the campaign, not only because it was the main problem of the country according to opinion polls, but also because a constitutional amendment, aimed at lowering the age of legal responsibility for minors, was put forward by some of the leaders of the opposition parties to be voted upon simultaneously with the general election.

## 2. Electoral system

The Uruguayan electoral process consists of four stages: mandatory party primaries (June 1, 2014), presidential and legislative elections (October 26, 2014), a second round or ballotage (November 30, 2014), and sub-national elections (May 9, 2015).

The first stage of the electoral cycle, the internal elections of political parties, is compulsory, binding, open, and essentially consists of concurrent primaries for all parties competing for the national executive and the legislature. Each party is obliged to elect one presidential candidate, as well as delegates to its National and District Conventions.<sup>1</sup> The National Convention is responsible for choosing the candidate for the vice presidency of the Republic and, depending on the circumstances, the presidential candidate, as long as the winner does not obtain more than half of the valid votes or does not reach at least 40% of the votes with a difference of 10 points with respect to the runner-up pre-candidate. The results of the primaries are constrained by a “Sore Loser Law,” meaning that nobody (elected or not) who runs for a party is allowed to change parties during the electoral cycle that lasts from June 2014 to April 2015. Unlike general elections, for internal elections voting is *not* mandatory.

The second stage consists of legislative and presidential elections. To distribute seats among parties in both chambers of Congress (comprised of thirty senators and ninety-nine representatives), the whole country is treated as a single national district and allocation of seats is made by proportional representation using the D'Hondt formula. Thus, if a given party obtains 10% of the vote, it will receive roughly 10% of the seats in each Chamber. Yet, parties have different internal groups (fractions) that are allowed to present their own lists of candidates in the legislative election. Those lists are closed and blocked, but since each party presents more than one list, Uruguayan citizens can cast an intra-party preferential vote. The distribution of the legislative seats obtained for each party, among the internal party fractions, is made by law in a second stage, following the distribution among parties.

The allocation of senators among internal party groups is also made in a single national district, so proportionality among groups is relatively maintained, but not so highly. The distribution of seats in the Chamber of Representatives among groups within the same party is made through 19

<sup>1</sup> Officially called the Órgano Deliberativo Nacional and Órgano Deliberativo Departamental, respectively.

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